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Con Greta, con Greta salviamo il pianeta: una ribellione dalle molte facce per ottenere azioni contro i cambiamenti climatici

“With Greta with Greta let’s save the planet” : A multi-faced rebellion to get action on climate change

Abstract

In this brief report, I try to make a portrait of Greta Thunberg’ life, outline the main goals of the movement, discuss the criticisms Greta has received, and reflect on my experience as a ‘grandmother’ activist in the FFF movement in Rome. I outline, how Greta began to worry about climate change and how she started the Fridays for Future Movement, by launching a school strike to demand action against climate change and how she gained youngsters’ support worldwide. Climate strikers underline that they are scared and angry because their future is being “robbed”. They take seriously the scientists’ warning that we have about 12 years to make drastic changes before rates of planetary warming will lead to irreversible consequences. They ask governments to declare a state of emergency and to “tell the truth” about the environmental situation worldwide. FFF want politicians to take extraordinary measures, to reach not only the goals set in Paris in 2017, but to arrive at zero emissions. Reading the book her mother wrote and hearing and seeing little Greta speak in Rome, I was moved to see how she and her family were able to transform huge family and personal problems- which included having to deal with Greta being an Asperger, who had trouble fitting in at school, had periods of selective mutism, and refusing to eat and also to come to terms to Greta’s sister severe anorexia,- into empowering opportunities for themselves and for the world, as we community psychologists maintain, all should do. I also share how I began to see the limits of identity politics that justly promoted the rights of all minorities, but also increased divides between men and women, young and old, straight and gay and fragmented all us of in different hostile tribes. Finally, I discuss why I have

become a grandmother activist in FFF because I am fascinated by their efforts to build a community that attempts to go beyond identity politics that divides people into tribes, in order to unite everyone under a common urgent goal.

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Keywords: Climate change, global warming, Greta Thunberg, identity politics, FFF (Friday for the Future movement)

Abstract

In questo breve rapporto, cerco di fare un ritratto della vita di Greta Thunberg, di esplicitare i principali scopi del suo movimento, discutere le critiche che Greta ha ricevuto e riflettere sulla mia esperienza come ‘un’attivista nonna” nel FFF movimento romano. Descrivo come Greta ha incominciato a preoccuparsi per i cambiamenti climatici, come ha iniziato i suoi scioperi per chiedere azioni immediate contro i cambiamenti climatici e come abbia ottenuto molto sostegno da giovani in tutto il mondo. Gli scioperanti per il clima sottolineano che sono impauriti ed arrabbiati perché “stiamo rubando il loro futuro”. Essi credono negli allarmi lanciati dagli scienziati che abbiamo solo 12 anni per fare cambiamenti drastici ed evitare che il riscaldamento globale porti a danni irreversibili. Essi chiedono che i governi dichiarino lo stato di emergenza e “dicano la verità” sulla situazione ambientale. Vogliono che i politici prendano misure straordinarie, per raggiungere gli obiettivi di Parigi 2017, e per arrivare a zero emissioni. Leggendo il libro scritto dalla madre di Greta e vedendo e ascoltando Greta qui a Roma, mi sono commossa constatando come lei e la sua famiglia sono state capaci di trasformare grossi problemi personali e familiari – come affrontare la forma di Asperger di Greta, i suoi problemi relazionali a scuola, i suoi periodi di mutismo selettivo e rifiuto del cibo, la severa anorexia della sorellina di Greta- in opportunita’ empowering per loro e per il mondo, come noi psicologi di comunita’ sosteniamo occorra fare. Inoltre condivido come ho iniziato a vedere i limiti di una politica identitaria che giustamente ha promosso i diritti di tutte le minoranze, ma ha anche aumentato i divari tra uomini e donne, giovani e anziani, etero e omosessuali e diviso tutti noi in diverse tribu’ antagonistiche. Nella parte finale, illustro cosa mi ha fatto diventare una “nonna attivista” nell FFF romano: la mia ammirazione per i loro sforzi di

costruire una comunità che cerca di andare oltre la politica identitaria che divide la gente in tribù, unendo tutti su un urgente obiettivo comune.

Parole chiave: cambiamento climatico, riscaldamento globale, Greta Thunberg, politiche identitarie, FFF (Friday for the Future movement).

Introduction

“Strike with Greta to stop climate change!” “What do we want? We want change”, and “When do we want it? We want it now!” are some of the slogans screamed by thousands of mostly very young people (some as young as ten, mostly teenagers, some adults and quite a few elders over 65, evenly distributed by gender). In the last months, across 275 cities around the world, they have marched on the streets to demand that politicians take immediate, drastic action to fight climate change. In this brief report, I will try to make a portrait of Greta Thunberg’s life, outline the main goals of the movement, the criticisms Greta has received, and reflect on my experience as a ‘grandmother’ activist in the FFF movement in Rome.

Who is Greta and how she started the Fridays for Future Movement

In the book written by Greta’s mother with contributions from all family members (Thunberg et al. 2019) we learn that Greta first heard about climate change at school at the age of eight, watching a documentary about plastic polluting the sea. She became very upset, thinking of the images she had seen also at night, sometimes lying sleepless and worried. She asked her parents and her teachers why so little was being done to address climate change, and started reading what scientists were writing. Her mother was a famous opera singer and her father an actor, both from well to do families. When Greta was born the father stopped acting so he could follow his wife all over Europe and both could be with Greta and later with her little sister Beata, while traveling to opera houses all over Europe. For twelve years they lived two months each in European cities like Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Amsterdam and Barcelona, and spent their summers in beautiful country places. The mother remembers those years as fantastic. However, when Greta turned eleven, she cried

for days when starting junior high school, stopped eating and became depressed that adults, including her parents, were doing so little to solve ecological problems. So, the mother gave up singing around the world and also to lower the family's carbon print all members stopped flying and became vegetarian. Greta stopped talking outside the family and was diagnosed a case of selective mutism. The eating disorders of Greta continued, she ate very little and very slowly, taking for example 53 minutes to eat a third of a banana, or 2 hours and 10 minutes to eat 5 noodles. She was reprimanded for making too many absences from school in 2014. She also had panic attacks and once emitted a deep roar for forty minutes that scared her parents, who began take her to a variety of doctors, who diagnosed her with high functioning Asperger syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder and selective mutism. In the autism center for eating disorders, after she lost ten kilograms they threatened to put Greta in a hospital, so she restarted talking, stating she would eat again, but did not return to school. So her parents both tutored her. Greta had a fantastic memory like her father: one of the schoolteacher taught her two hours a week, and in this short time, Greta could catch up on her all subjects. In 2010, her small sister Beata, who was gifted in music, at ten started to have emotional meltdowns as her mother calls them: she had huge temper tantrums, complaining that her parents were neglecting her to take care of Greta. She did well in school but at home, she fought frequently with her mother, swearing at her, calling her “the worst mother in the world” and throwing books at her. Beata became unable to control her negative emotions that were triggered by noises, smells, and tastes. Her worn out parents took her to the psychiatric pediatric clinic and she was diagnosed as ADHD but doctors did not give any useful advice to the parents. For five years they were unable to eat all together or be in the same room since any small noise they made was unbearable for Beata. For example, when some neighbors remodeled their bathroom, the noise triggers a rage attack from Beata that kicked doors, walls and scratched her parents who tried to stop her. The father thought that taking at a trip to Sardinia could help, but as soon as they landed Beata had a panic attach, cried all night, asked to go home the next morning.

In the book Greta’s mother laments that they spent five painful years touring all the health services, which provided several diagnoses for her daughters, but not much guidance on how to help them. In school Greta was a victim of bullying and classmates made fun of her for being very shy and speaking in a very low voice. Her mother thinks that Swedish

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schools are good for 75% the students who have no problems, but they are ill equipped to deal with diverse children who cannot follow “the normal paths.” School systems do not know how to deal with children with autism, 82% of these students are victim of bullying, and they have found ties between depression, autism and suicides of young kids and development of anorexia in girls.

In her teen years, Greta become even more concerned about ecological problems and read almost compulsively about them until, more worried than ever, she felt she could no longer shut herself at home but she had to speak out, because she felt she was dying inside if she did not protest. So on August 20th 2018, Greta who has just begun high school, started to sit in front of Parliament with a sign stating she was on a school strike for the climate. She credits being an Asperger as giving her the determination and single mindedness to focus on climate change for many years, and the propensity to act alone because she is not very good in socializing. She sat alone in front of Parliament, she writes her speeches alone and with her wonderful memory she repeats them with great efficacy in public meetings with her fans and also in formal occasions. She thinks that her Asperger is not a disease but a gift (Thunberg et al. 2019). Reading the book, and hearing and seeing little Greta speak in Rome, I was moved to see how she and her family were able to transform huge family and personal problems into empowering opportunities for themselves and for the world, as we community psychologists maintain, all should do.

Gaining world wide support for her Friday for the Future Movement

After her strike on August 20th she posted photos of her protest on Twitter and Instagram. She almost immediately got media attention with the help of entrepreneur Ingmar Rentzhog who posted her pictures on Facebook. She soon got a huge number of followers on social media, and many school strikes were promoted in various countries. In October 20th 2018 she made a speech in Helsinki inviting people to sit in front of their parliaments every Friday, until politicians took actions to respect the Paris climate agreement. So, the *Friday for the Future movement* (FFF) came into being in many countries, and Global Climate Strike manifestations were held on March 15th and May 24th 2019, in more that 270 cities. Little Greta, who had been closed in her house and mute for many years, in these last months has been traveling all over by train, participating and giving rousing speeches with

the skill of a born orator, for example in “Rise for climate demonstrations” in Stockholm and Helsinki. In London she addressed the “Declaration of Rebellion” organized by Extinction Rebellion, a new movement that has the same aims as Friday for the Future but uses different modalities to get attention, like street traffic blocs, taking off clothes in the guest sector of the British Parliament, which have landed more than 1000 members in jail. (Graeber, 2019). Greta also sat in Brussels in front of the European Parliament in October. The crowds that protested with her grew larger and she was invited to speak at Ted X in November 2018, and subsequently to discuss with the Secretary General Antonio Guterres in December 2018 at a UN climate summit. Everywhere she underlined that we are facing an immediate, unprecedented crisis that has never been treated as a crisis and our leaders are all acting like children and that we need to wake up and change everything. She was especially critical on January 2019 with her listeners at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where she arrived after a 32-hour train journey, in contrast to the many delegates who came by more 1500 individual jet flights. She boldly said: "Some people, some companies, some decision makers in particular have known exactly what priceless values they have been sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money. I think many of you here today belong to that group of people...I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire – because it is." (Thunberg et al. 2019 back cover). She wrote in an article for the Guardian in January 2019: "According to the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), we are less than 12 years away from not being able to undo our mistakes. In that time, unprecedented changes in all aspects of society need to have taken place, including a reduction of our CO2 emissions by at least 50%".

Greta was equally bold when in April 2019 she met with members of the European Parliament and European Union officials, she reproached them "for three emergency Brexit summits and no emergency summit regarding the breakdown of the climate and the environment"... " The extinction rate is up to 10,000 times faster than what is considered normal, with up to 200 species becoming extinct every single day". In addition, the "erosion of fertile topsoil, deforestation of the rainforest, toxic air pollution, loss of insects and wildlife, acidification of our oceans ... are all disastrous trends." Greta was given a

standing ovation at the end of her speech. In April she also came to Rome to meet the pope, go to the Senate and participated in a manifestation organized by the Roman Friday for Future movement, and then flew to London to support an Extinction Rebellion 's event. In spite of her many engagements, however, when she is in Stockholm she still stages her regular protests outside the Swedish parliament every Friday, where other students now join her. Her activism has not interfered with her schoolwork, but she has had less spare time.

Aims of the FFF movements

Climate strikers underline that they are scared and angry because their future is being “robbed”. They take seriously the scientists’ warning that we have about 12 years to make drastic changes before rates of planetary warming will lead to irreversible consequences. They lament that technocrats trained in neoclassic economic theory protect the interests of the wealthy elites, and take decisions that affect young people who will be fifty in 30 years, when the current governing elites will be safely dead. Cunningly as Greta writes her followers want the grownups to experience the fear young people feel today when envisioning their future. They underline that we need politicians to collaborate to coordinate efforts to save the planet. They lament that both left and rightwing parties look to the past. The left toward “midcentury welfare states, and the other, darkly toward xenophobia and nationalism, the collapsing center warn us to fear political passion of any sort” (Graeber, 2019).

They ask governments to declare a state of emergency and to “tell the truth” about the environmental situation worldwide. They underline that scientists agree that thousands of species are in danger of extinction, that humanity faces an existential threat, with water, soil and air deeply polluted. We are in front of climate emergency that will bring irreversible damage for our planet and the extinction of many species. We are going to have water scarcity, desertification, rising sea levels, famines, conflicts and mass forced migration. They want politicians to take extraordinary measures, to reach not only the goals set in Paris in 2017, but to arrive at zero emissions. This transition requires huge social and economic changes, that have to be implemented by helping the developing countries and not forcing them to cut their emissions as fast as western countries, following ecological equity and social justice’s principles.

Through their weekly Friday protest and especially organizing huge manifestations when global strikes are proclaimed, (the last two March 15th and May 24th 2019) FFF members hope to raise climate change awareness and put pressure on politicians to take actions needed to meet the Paris goals. They have achieved some small results in Italy, the fish containers in polyester will be abandoned by EATLY and replaced with recyclable polyethylene bows. Italian senators promised to enact new laws to cut emission. In Britain, the leader of the Labor Party, Jeremy Corbyn persuaded Parliament to pass a symbolic motion declaring a national state of climate emergency. Also Scotland, Ireland and some Swiss towns did the same. Eight countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Holland Portugal Spain and Sweden) have proposed to spend a quarter of the European Union budget to fight climate change.

Controversy

Friday for Future movements have many opponents who have tried to discredit Greta, with three different modalities.

Climate deniers try to undermine the credibility of Greta, stating that climate change emergencies belong to “fake news” and they contests the scientificity of her claims. Some attack her viciously: Vittorio Feltri, a right wing journalist calls Greta ugly and accuses her to bring bad luck since when she came to meet the Pope the weather in Italy became colder. He often calls her Gretina, which in Italian rhymes with cretina, which means very stupid. Others are convinced she is a puppet in the hands of leftists with their old communist ideologies who try to make her the new face of anti-capitalism, because some of the older members of the Roman FFF group have been leftist or anti Berlusconi in the past (Aiello, 2019)

Supporters of secret financial backers attempt to find who is sponsoring her and how they stand to profit from her fame and visibility. In fact, some have tried unsuccessfully to exploit her. In late 2018, Ingmar Rentzhog, founder of the non-profit We Don't Have Time Foundation (WDHT), asked Greta to become an unpaid youth advisor and used her name and image without her knowledge or permission to raise millions for WDHT's for-profit subsidiary We Don't Have Time AB. Greta however received no money and she ended her volunteer advisor role with WDHT.

Critics who fear that Greta with her multiple psychological problems is harming herself with her school strikes For example, Swedish journalist Paulina Neuding who writes for [Quillette](#) magazine, worries that the fame and attention that Greta has received may put excessive pressure on a person with multiple mental diagnoses. She claims that school strikes are a way to attract adult attention, but giving all this attention to Greta is not an appropriate adult response.

I think some people and especially journalists and politicians who crave fame and visibility, are envious of Greta and resent her for diminishing the opportunities for them to be come more visible and recognized. Greta in the book clearly answers all the accusations stating that she travels with the permission of her school, and that her parents pay her train tickets and hotels. She is not part of any organization, does her pro climate activities for free, does not receive money and neither do her family members and close associates.

Reflections as a grandmother activist in a community that attempts to go beyond identity politics that divides people into tribes, in order to unite everyone under a common goal

My sister Grazia Francescato, who has been a passionate environmentalist all her life, in February 2019, asked me to give a hand to a new movement of Roman supporters of Greta Thunberg. I went to two of their manifestations and I liked that participants were mostly under 25 and full of enthusiasm, together with some adults. I especially admired the inventive, funny protest signs they held up, the slogans they chanted, and the music they played. So I offered to become an activist, which meant coming to the protest every Friday, publicize the group's aims and activities on social media, and most importantly add my phone number to the main group chat, where all the members communicate, post video, engage in debates, publish photos and build affective relations. Now in May 2019, the Roman group has more than 200 activists, who meet every Monday afternoon in an assembly where they take decisions. Each activist is also part of work groups such as logistics, artistic, scientific matters, and communications. They have successfully organized the global Strike of March 15, the visit of Greta on April 19. For this visit, we formed a special Performance 19 group of people, ranging from our 12 year old granddaughter, and her grandparents over 70. We sat for about two hours in the square of Piazza del Popolo, dressed up with gas masques in a circle facing another outside circle of plastic waste. In the middle there was a small plant we were protecting. That day I understood why I had

immediately liked this movement, because it succeeds, in building bridges between young and old, men and women, immigrants and Italians, and it goes beyond the old right and left split that divides most western countries today. These young people think that becoming fully aware of the climate emergency can persuade most of us to pursue a common goal: saving our planet, since we are all earthlings living in a beautiful and frail speck of the immense universe around us.

I have been a strong supporter of identity politics for decades, because I was a member of two tribes, feminism and community psychology, that were marginal and did not have much power in our society or in academia. I supported the feminist movement that fought to overcome the discriminations and violence women suffered for centuries. I worked for free for ten years in the feminist magazine Effe, (now online www.efferivistafemminista). As a community psychologist I tried to promote a positive identity of community psychology in academic and professional settings, where its presence was marginal. Community psychology focuses on prevention and on empowering persons, groups, organizations and local communities, in an Italian context where most psychologists work primarily with individuals, couples or families. As a member of a minor discipline in most psychology departments, I promoted community psychology identity, helping to build Italian and European and Global community psychology associations, developing new theories and modes of intervention and training both professionals and academics. But in the last few years I began to see the limits of both feminism and community psychology and more in general of identity politics that focused on promoting the rights of ethnic minorities, but also increased divides between men and women, young and old, and fragmented all us of in different hostile tribes. I began to feel we needed to be more united to face the huge problems we have to tackle today.

As I have documented elsewhere (Francescato 2017), in the last two decades the interaction of some macro changes such as the emergence of China as an economic and political superpower, the growth of global terrorism, the speed and breath of technological innovation, the spread of social media and political polarization have created economic, political and environmental problems, and a very conflict and fragmented society in which identity politics has prevailed and each tribe tried to look for the interest of their group.

All these negative developments have their roots according to eco-feminists, (Marcomin and Cima 2018, Raworth, 2017) in the uncritical adoption by almost all countries worldwide of a libertarian free market ideology, a growth model based on the GNP (Gross National Product), and an accumulation of weapons. Many nations are governed by alpha males who pursue wealth and power through extreme economic competition, the use of violence to solve conflicts, and the ruthless exploitation of environmental resources. Eco-feminists, who represent the third wave of feminism, maintain there is a tie between the subordination of women in society, domestic violence, the abuse of natural resources, environmental degradation, and the increase of local wars and ethnic conflicts. Some support for the eco-feminists thesis, that most male politicians pursue their own wealth and power and tend to become authoritarians, come from recent studies of personality and values among male and female politicians. Male politicians are more power oriented, more likely to use force or threat of force, and pursue self-interest; while female politicians adhere to more benevolent and universal values, caring for others, for the environment and preferring peaceful ways to solve conflicts (Francescato et al., 2017).

Also an American political analyst (Brooks 2017) thinks the rise to power of authoritarian personalities such as Trump, Putin, and Erdogan is promoting the collapse of the postwar order established after the Second World War. The founding generation built a series of organizations and alliances to fight communism, create a stable trading system, combat global poverty and promote democracy and inclusion. But gradually world's elites concentrated power upward and away from the people, at the same time that technology was pushing informational power downward toward the people. So many citizens in most countries lost faith in their rulers, who they perceived as divided, corrupt and self-centered, and began to vote anti-system strong men like Trump, Putin, and Erdogan. So according to Brooks (2017) the core divide in our politics is no longer the conventional right and left divide, but between politicians who try to rebuild trust among voters and to build bridges between opposite groups and politicians who exploit citizens' mistrust and exploit society's divides to increase their authoritarian power'.

The FFF movement is trying to build bridges from the bottom up, attracting young people by practicing an inclusive ecofeminism (men and women, Italian and members of other

ethnic groups, young and old). As long as they want to “save the planet”, are all welcome. FFF also, practices democratic participation, creativity and mutual support. In the weekly assembly nobody can talk for more than a few minutes, in the Whatsapp chats each participant can express an opinion, post a photo or a video and be criticized or praised but always with respect. Often people with different opinions post interesting articles and engage in great debates at all hours. Members defend the independence of the movement from any party and also are cautious in their relation with the press. I hope the FFF movement will prosper and reach its goals, which will improve the life of all of us. I encourage very strongly the readers of this report to contact FFF groups in your town there are more than 100 groups in Italy. You will have a special experience in inclusive diversity and lots of fun!

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